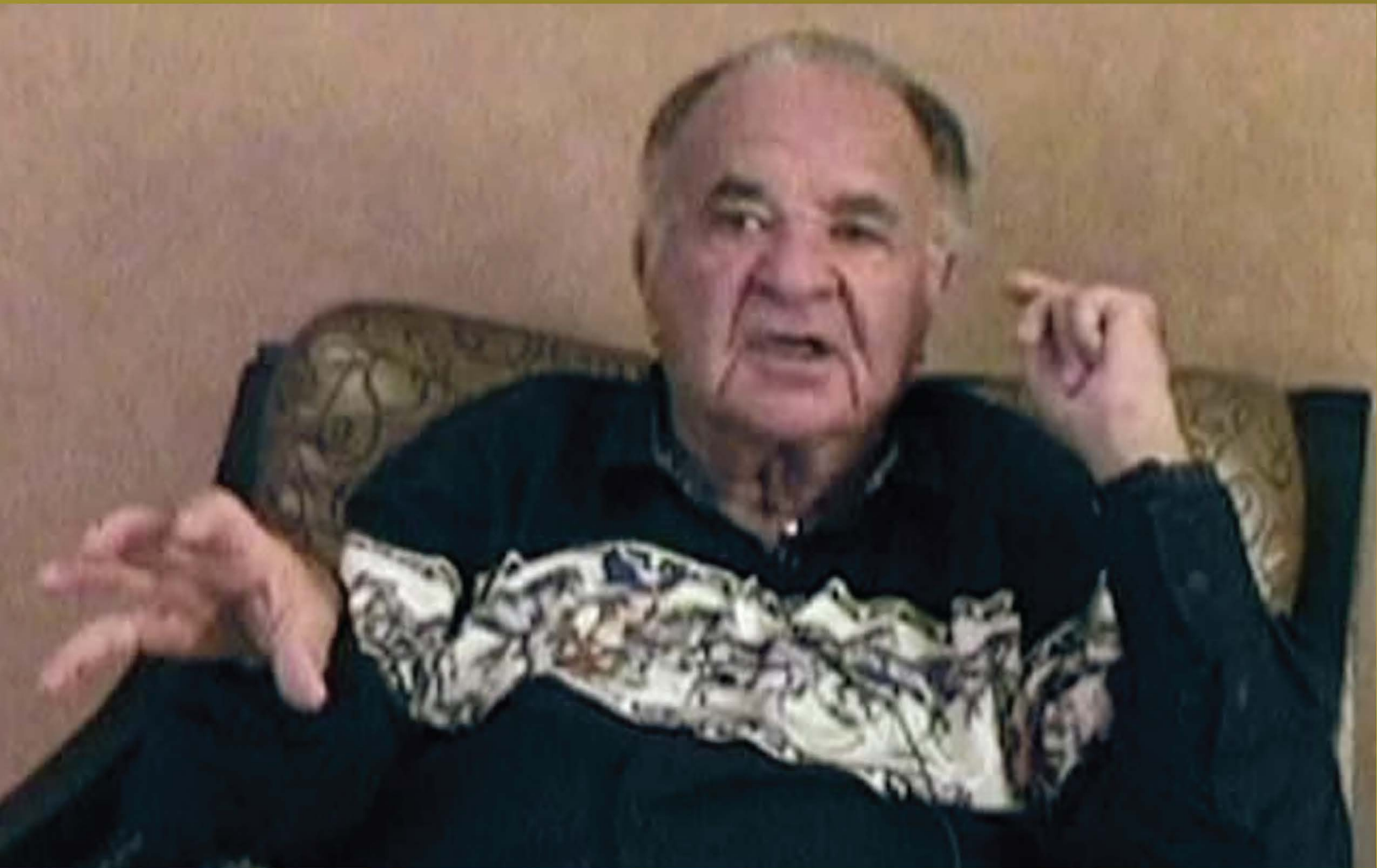


## Al Feldstein Interview!



*From Batman to Gotham:  
50 Years of Comic Book TV Heroes  
Part Three of A Four Part Series*



## **Jef Parker and the Beginning of Collector's Edge Comics Part 3: Excalibur Comics and Jef Parkers' First Store**

In the early spring of 1982, one of my friends that I would often walk to school with asked me if I had been to the new comic shop on Mitchell St. I wasn't even aware of it, and told him I would have to check it out. His response was nearly instant regret, saying "Great, I suppose you're going to spend all your time after school there now?" Not quite all, but it certainly changed the course of my after school life for a while.

Thus I entered my most formative phase as relates to comics and comic collecting. It was at this shop that I met so many interesting people, vastly widened my appreciation and understanding of comics and their history, and even met some professional comic artists for the first time. The impact of this time on me is felt even to this day.

The store was Excalibur Comics, and while it wasn't the first dedicated comic shop in Milwaukee - The Good Old Days owned by Dale Manesis would be the progenitor in this area - it was one of the early and few but would have one of the longest lasting impacts on comic collectors in the city. It was located at 805 E. Mitchell St, now called Historic Mitchell St. and while it was a relatively small shop by today's standards, it looms large in my memories.

Upon revisiting the location last year, I got a better sense of the literal space. The main area was about 18 by 32 feet, with a wall built at the back to separate the sales floor from the stock area. Added on to this was a raised "stage" of sorts at the front of the shop that added about 7 feet to the length of the store. The front window was at an angle, and there was a short ramp up into the place. Directly in front of the door along the left wall was a series of comic racks arranged with Marvels on the top sections, and DC's below. The burgeoning independent comics were on a separate rack at the end of the main racks, and the selection was only a handful of comics at first. There was a small (very small) bathroom at the end of the racks, right before the doorway to the back area. The original 2-page art to the splash pages of Warlord #2 hung framed above the doorway. I always loved to look at that piece.

At the front of the store by the raised stage were a couple of tall display cases in an "L" shape with a gap between them, behind which was the cash register on a large cabinet. Along the right side of the room after the first tall display case were a series of shorter, flat jewelry-store style display cases for rarer older comics. At the end of these cases near the back was a short half-wall with DC comics along it that divided the main floor from a small meeting/break area with a table, chairs, and a soda machine.

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Editor and Publisher: *Robin Dale*

Comic Fandom Quarterly logo designed by *Arlen Schumer*

### **Coming Soon**

CFQ #10 - Comic Book TV Shows Part 4!





**Robin Dale:** Al, thank you for joining us today.

**Al Feldstein:** You're welcome, I'm looking forward to it.

**RD:** We're looking forward to talking to you about your long and illustrious career and some of the great history you had with EC, and comics in general, and Mad Magazine particularly. Why don't you take us back to how you got started in the business, you were quite young?

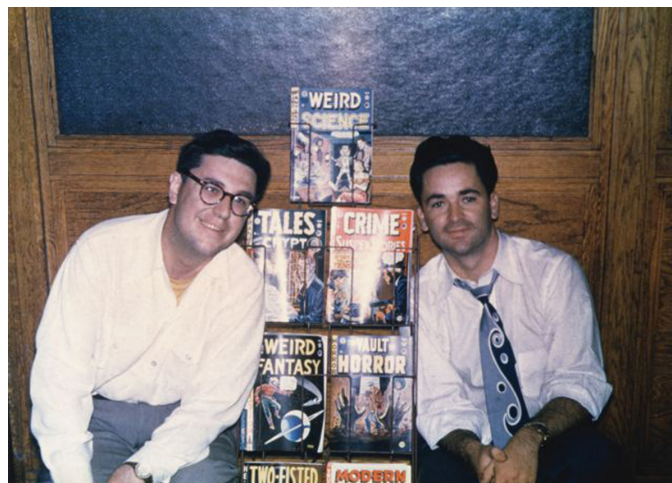
**AF:** Oh I was 15, I was going to a place called High School Music and Art in New York, which was a special high school that Fiorello LaGuardia had started. He had a wonderful idea about education that I think we've lost today, where he wanted to encourage kids with talent and their various talents in high schools that would specialize in specific areas. He had technical high schools, he had the Bronx High School of Science, and he had the School of Performing Arts which was in a movie, he had School of Graphic Art and Design, and he had a High School Music and Art, which was music students and art students that were interested in fine art. We had to take a test to get in, there was nothing like today with the open enrollment, that were looking for kids was specialties and they were selective, and I went there and it changed my life.

**RD:** Was there's some kind of aptitude test or some kind of thing to get in?

**AF:** Drawing, art tests! You had to give them a portfolio of your work plus you had to go there and take an on-the-spot test, and they would test you for various abilities in art. They gave me something I had never done before which was a contour drawing test in which I had to draw a model sitting there, starting at one point with a contour line that did not break and

ran around and finished up back started. It was interesting but the point is that I got in and I was very excited about it. It was an hour and fifteen minute ride from my home in Brooklyn to the school in New York, but as I said it changed my life. I was there four years ago and I had a regular academic course plus the art. It was a long day. And of course this was 1938, 1939, in the heart of the Depression for me and my

family. My folks could just about afford to give me the dime to get on the subway to go, with a bag lunch, and so things like dating were a problem of my own. I would take all kinds of jobs like pin setter in a bowling alley, before they had the automatic pin setting, where I would sit there at night and dodge the pins and the balls and get a dime a line. I had a job at a Dude ranch for the summer and the spring, I was a waiter and horse boy, I did drug store deliveries.



*Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein in 1950*



You know this was - it isn't like today you know? In those days the folks were trying to keep their head above water and anything extra that I needed I had to go get myself. I heard about a kid was making 20 bucks a page - now 20 dollars in those days was a fortune. I mean you know because I was working for nickels and dimes. He was doing comic book art work! Now I'd never read a comic book, I never had the dime. I borrowed a couple of comic books and

made up a portfolio, which was terrible, and I went around looking for work, and of course you know I got laughed out of most of the publishing houses. One kind editor said to me, "Al, you've got art talent, but you don't know how to draw comics, and you need to learn the art of drawing comics." There are studios there are serving the comic book industry, you might want to get a job there as like an apprentice, and he gave me the name of a place called Eisner and Iger. Eisner was Will Eisner, Jerry Iger was his partner, and they had this studio where they were doing artwork for Jumbo Comics, Fiction House, and Arnold which was doing Dollman, he had several good clients. So I went

down there with my portfolio and he looked at it said "What are you looking for?" and I said "I'm looking for work!" and he said "OK I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll hire you as a deliver boy, and you erase pages, and you learn what's in front of you, the artwork of various artists that I have."

Well his artists were some of the big names in the business at the time, but you know it was the Depression and these guys were in need of regular

income, so they took this job for whatever they got a week, I don't know. But Lou Fine for example, and Reed Crandall, and Bill Williams, and Bob Webb who was doing Sheena, and Mort Lev, and Raphael Astarita, I mean these are the wonderful artists. Well today they are like legends, and I would erase their pages and run errands for Jerry because he would send artwork up there to the various publishers, and I started to learn the trade. I was sitting next to Bob

Webb and Bob said "Here do the leopard spots on Sheena's groin and brassiere" (laughter) and that was my first published artwork, leopard spots on Sheena's gorgeous body! So little by little I started to do backgrounds and eventually worked my way up to doing whole pages, and at the same time I decided I wanted to be an art teacher, so I was going to Brooklyn College during the day, and then I had a scholarship to the Art Student League. So I was working with Jerry in summers, and I did after school until I graduated high school, when I got the Art Student League scholarship I had to give up working in the afternoons at Jerry's place, but I used to work summers there.



*Junior #13 (1948)*

Then I was faced with the draft, and I didn't want to get drafted into the infantry so I signed up for the Air Force. I signed up something that was called the Silver Wings club, which was kids in college, and I was at Brooklyn studying art education because I wanted to be an art teacher. I never thought about comics as a career, just as a stop-gap measure, well to get me money for dates! Because the problem with was going to Music and Art was the whole student body came from all over the five boroughs of



Manhattan, and if I wanted to date a girl and she lived in Queens, I had to get out there to Queens to pick her up, to take her where we were going, to bring her back, so I needed car fare and stuff like that. So that's how I got started, and then I went in to the service, and a very interesting thing happened.

We were cadets and we were supposed to be going in for flying training, but when they called us up - and part of the Silver Wings club deal was that they'd let you finish your semester at college before they called

you up after your 18th birthday - so they called me up after my 18th birthday. We all went in, I went with 125 kids from Brooklyn and the other boroughs that had signed up for this thing, and the air war in Europe, when I was called up which was in March of 1943, was pretty well won. I mean they had the Thunderbirds and the P38's escorting the bombers and they had the Luftwaffe pretty well knocked out of the air, and they really didn't need this group of kids that they had promised to be the pilots, bombardiers, navigators, but they did need gunners and radio men and replacements for the guys that were getting flacked-out in the various bombing runs. And so contrary

to our deal, they gave us our psych motor tests, which are the dexterity tests and intelligence tests and everything like that, that the ordinarily would have given us after preflight, which was the start of our training, they gave it to us right at basic training, and they washed out 85 percent of the class.

Well I was lucky I had scored high in the tests that they gave and so I was assigned to something - and

like I said there were just a few of us left - they sent us to on-the-line training they called it. Which was to hold us in case they needed us in the Pacific. I was shipped out to Blytheville, Arkansas to an advanced flying base. They march us out onto the tarmac and this sergeant some were from the south says to us "All right you kids from Brooklyn, this is what are you're gonna do. You're gonna service these planes for the cadets and this is how you do it" and he started to show us how to drain sumps and check magnetos and things I don't know anything about.

Then out comes these crew-cut handsome guys in flight suits that have taken all the flying training and now in advanced - this was a twin engine school - they're taking their advanced flying because they're going to be bombing crews.

And I said to myself, "Jeez I don't want to be responsible for these guys lives." I don't know anything about this, I never had a jalopy, I never worked on an auto engine. I didn't anything. So I went to the Special Services officer and I said "Hey I'm an artist. Can you use it me?" and he said yes! He said OK I'll have you transfered and so I was transferred to Special Services on detachment from the Cadet Corp. I was

always a cadet but I was in special services for the entire war. I went from Blytheville to Columbus and then to Albany, Georgia and it was just fantastic and I had a wonderful career doing artwork in service. Base newspaper comic strips. Then I got married while I was in service and so I was optimistic about continuing in my art education and becoming a teacher. And I figured now I could go to Colombia under the G.I. bill, I didn't have to go to a free college



*A Moon, A Girl...Romance #9*

like Brooklyn. So I applied for Columbia and I had to wait until the semester was over before I would know if I was accepted. Meantime my in-laws had found an apartment for us in the same building as they were living in Brooklyn and so I had to pay the rent, so I took a job with Jerry again. I went back to Jerry temporarily until my semester in college started. All of a sudden I'm making more than a teacher. Jerry is paying me because I'm doing this stuff and he needs the work done and I'm making more than a starting teacher and I'm now stuck in the comic book industry.

**Robin Dale:** So then after you got out of the service and started working for Jerry, how did you get from there to EC?

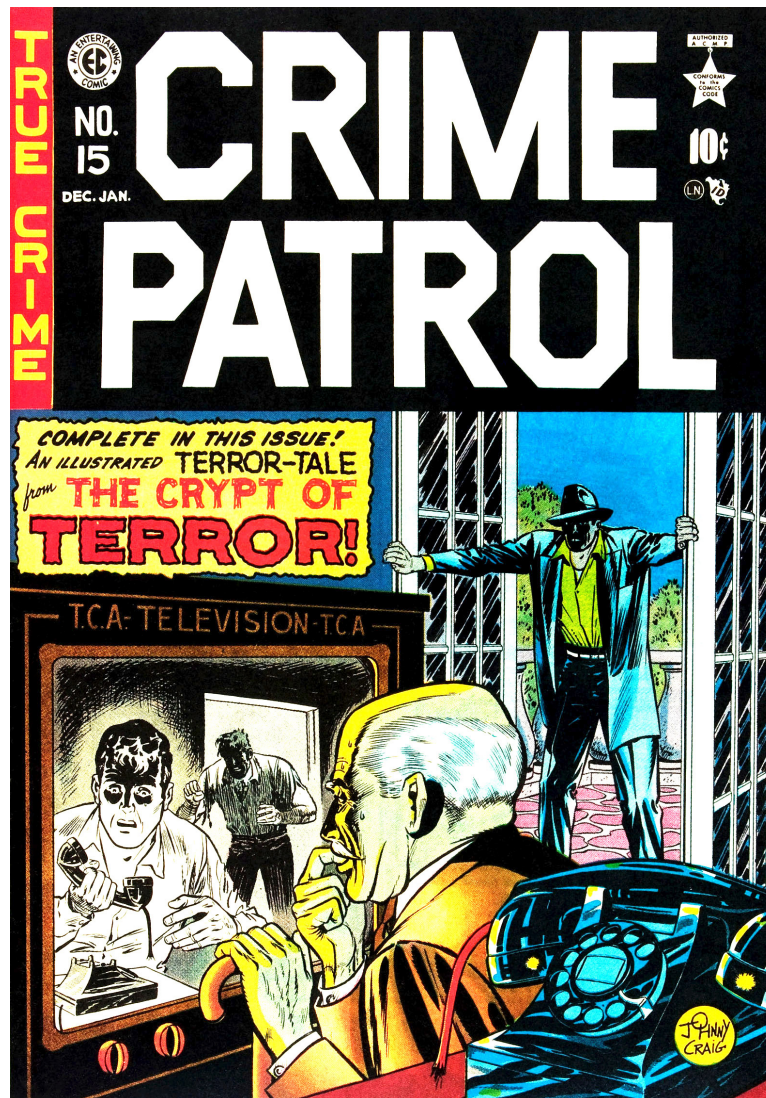
**AF:** Ok, well there was a little bit of a transition. I was working for Jerry and I was turning out like maybe two pages a day of finished art, and he's paying me \$85 a week, and I'm realizing he's getting \$35 a page for every page that he's selling to these publishers. So he's making my salary practically on one of the 5 days I'm working, and the rest is clear profit. So I said to myself, you know I could go out and freelance and get jobs and I wouldn't have to work more than two days and be making what Jerry's paying me. So I said "Goodbye Jerry, I'm freelancing!" I went out and I started to freelance and I did work for various publishers, and I ended up befriending a gentleman named Bob Farrell and he was publishing, and he had a friend named Victor Fox, Fox publishing. And I was doing some stuff for Bob and he said "You know Fox is looking for an artist to do teenage comics, to imitate the Archie trend, and I can introduce you, and if you get work I'll

be your agent, you gotta give me 10%" That's the way guys were in those days, everybody stole from the artist. I said OK and so I went and I met Victor Fox and I met his editor and they said to me "You know we're looking for somebody to package the whole book." So I said "You know, funny thing, my wife is a writer and she can write it and I'll of draw it and package the book." I lied! (laughter) My wife didn't know anything about writing comics. So I wrote and drew for Fox two teenage books - Junior and Sunny - and then he gave me a book to start because

he had gotten a contract with a very popular radio show book called Corliss Archer, which was on par with Henry Aldrich at the time, so I started packaging these books and I was doing very well.

The books were being lettered by a guy named Jim Roten, and he used a machine type lettering because he had been a K&E Engineering salesman and they had this lettering stuff for lettering floor plans and stuff, and he had an idea that if you could get it to slide and move fast, he could letter comic book balloons, so he was. He and his wife were lettering comic balloons, I was writing the stuff directly on the board - because I didn't know how to type - we worked out a system where I

would drop down two lines and write the book caption, and write the balloons and he would letter it in, then I would erase everything out and finish up the job and send it in. Well one day he says to me "You know Al, Fox is associated with the bent-nose guys and some racetrack in San Juan Puerto Rico. Make sure you get paid before you start your next job." And so I made it a practice to make sure they paid me



Crime Patrol #15 (1949)



immediately upon delivery before I started the next book, and they were very good about that, but I still felt it was shaky. He was shaky financially. Then I got a no notice from Jim, he said to me "You know Max Gaines was just killed in a speedboat crash on Lake Placid, and his son is taking over the business but he doesn't know anything about it. He's got a business manager named Saul Cohen and Saul wants to put out a teenage book. Why don't you got and see them?" Because I think they're better off financially than Fox. So I went down and saw this nerd (laughter) this heavy-set, horn-rimmed glasses, crew cut guy named Bill Gaines and we shook hands and Saul said they want to do a teenage book. So I said to Bill, OK I'll do one, but I'm doing one now, and if I have to give that up, I'd like something a little better than just whatever dollars a page I was getting, you know whatever package I was getting. I said I want a percentage of the profits of the book and Bill said "Ok."

**RD:** Wow you were WAY ahead of the curve on that one!

**AF:** Well yeah I was, I was a little pushy, but I was also a little independent because I had my own work with Fox, and Bill said OK. We signed a contract for a book called *Going Steady With Peggy*, and I started to pencil it, and I was doing the Fox thing, and for some reason or other he stopped publishing, or something, I don't remember exactly what happened there, but I get a call from Bill one day, he says "Come on in Al, I gotta talk to you" and I said OK. He comes in and says "You know, the teenage market is in trouble" - it wasn't in trouble, but that's what he said - "and I'm forced to publish this

and if I lose money on this, you and I are finished." I think I had a contract for three issues. And knowing that Fox was sinking, I said "All right Bill, tear up their contract, and give me work." And we became fast friends. I said I want to write my own stuff. So I was writing western and crime - he had a western book and a crime book - and I was writing my own stuff and drawing it, and he was paying me freelance. I lived in Brooklyn and he lived in Brooklyn, and he had just come off of bad marriage and was divorced and was living with his mother, and I was living in Brooklyn

with my wife and a brand new baby in a three room apartment. He used to drive me home in this wonderful Chrysler that had wood sides and the first Hydramatic drive, and I was very impressed. So while we were working, Simon and Kirby come out with romance comics, so Bill says "We gotta do romance!" So now I'm doing romance. He's got freelance writers and everything you understand, but I'm writing my own stuff. So he says "I'm changing *Moon Girl* to a romance book, got an idea about what we can call it?"

In those days they had what is called "second class entry," that's how comic books were distributed from the printing press, to the

wholesaler, to the mom and pop stores. So the wholesalers all over the country that got boxes of these comics, and the way they were transported was through the US Mail. And the way they were financially able to do that was something called "second class entry," which was very cheap for publishers to ship boxes of comics. So in order to have "second class entry," you had to put up a bond,



*Haunt of Fear #14 (1952)*



for each title because there were certain restrictions. For example, you couldn't have more than two and a half pages of advertising for example. You had to have two pages of text. Some congressman decided when they set up the "second class entry" thing that comics weren't going to teach kids to read, so we got to put texts so they would learn how to read. Nobody ever read the text! You go look through the old comic books, every old comic book had a little two page text, or two short one page stories. So Bill want to change *Moon Girl*, which wasn't doing very well, to a romance book, I said let's call it *A Moon, A Girl - Romance!* and he didn't have to change his bond!

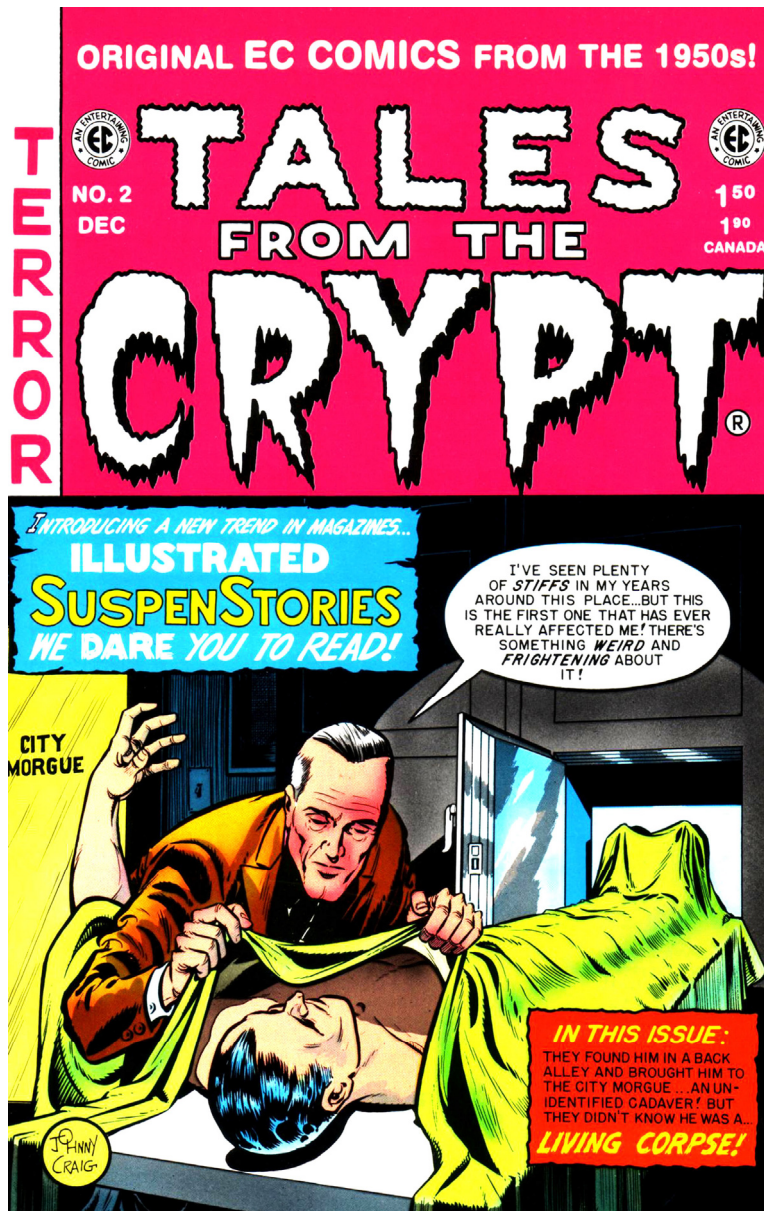
**RD:** Let's pause a moment because I'd like you to elaborate on that just a little. That was an interesting thing that was used for a long time and has been very confusing collectors for a long time. Like you said, they had to put up a bond for each title, so quite often when they wanted to a different title, they would just change the title -

**AF:** and continue the numbering, yeah. Then you would keep the bond. That's why *Weird Science* stared at #12. Anyway, so I'm chastising him, let's stop following these guys, you know? You're going to put out a romance book now and Simon and Kirby are the innovators and their romance book is gonna last, and as soon as everybody else in the business jumps on this bandwagon - and you have to understand, in those days there were 600 titles on the newsstands. There were mom and pop stores all over the country, and

newsstands run by blind people even, you know, that featured comic books. So they were distributed well, kids came to the mom and pop stores and had Cokes, read the comics, stole them, read them and put them back on the rack and whatever. The point is it was a popular visual art form. It preceded television of course. So I said why are you following? You've got two crime books that your dad put out that are

imitations of Lev Gleason's *Crime Does Not Pay*, and you're with 50 other titles like that. You're now going to put out a romance book and there's going to be 50 more titles of that and we're going to be imitators. Let's be innovators, let's let them follow us. Let's start stuff they don't do. And let's see what we can do about making our stuff the original that outlasts the trend. So he said "Like what?" and we chatted and I said, you know I was a fantastic fan of horror movies like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* and when I was a kid I used to sneak downstairs because my brother was babysitting for me when my folks were out, and he was five years older than me, and he was listening to the *Witches Tales* and *Light's Out* and *Inner Sanctum* - these were

radio shows - and they all had hosts. So I said why don't we do horror? Why don't we scare the pants off kids? Now I know I was aware, because I had done a few freelance stories when I left Jerry's, I had done a few things for *Adventures Into The Unknown*, but that was kind of simple ghost stories and stuff. Let's do Grand Guignol type stuff, really scary. Bill was always very cautious, and he was also concerned about



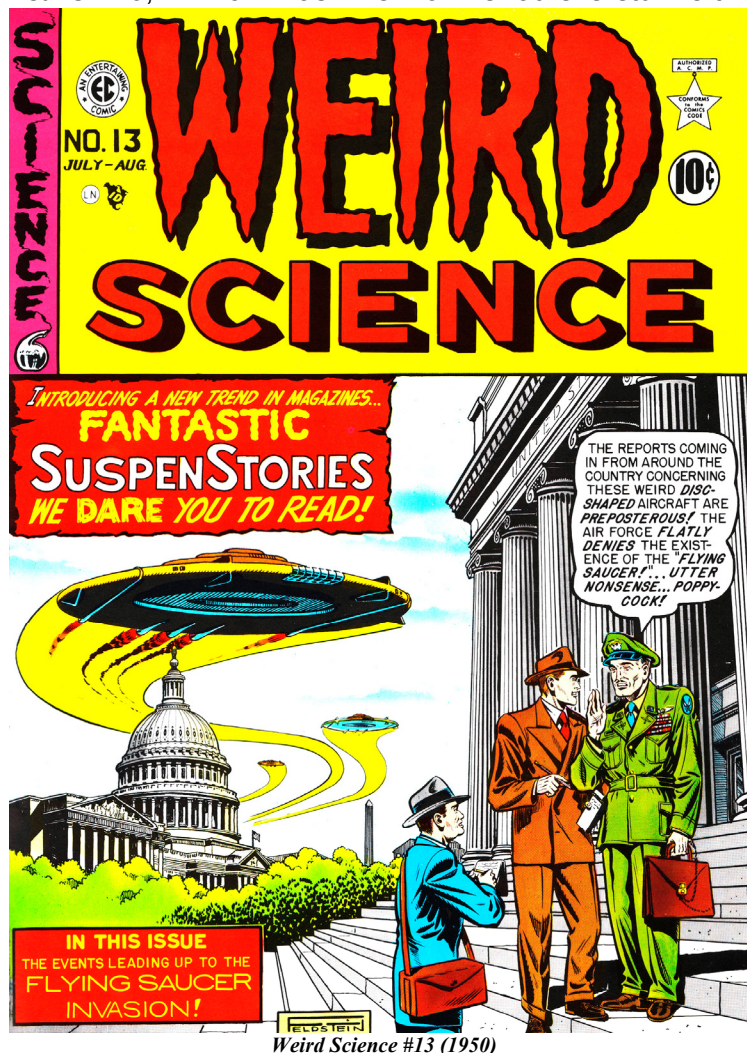
making a success out of the publishing company - you know he hated being pushed into it - for his mother sake, and because he wanted to prove to his father. So he said "Let's try it. Do me something and we'll put it into *Crime Patrol*." So I invented something called the Crypt of Terror with the Crypt Keeper, and he was going to tell stories and be the host in his crypt of terror realm, and we were going to scare the pants off of kids. And that was how it was introduced, it was introduced in *Crime Patrol*. And then he said "Let's try one in *War Against Crime*," which was another crime book, so I invented the Vault Keeper and the Vault of Horror. And that's how that got started and that's how Bill Gaines got into the horror comics. It was a pleasure on my part.

Now in those days, each mom and pop store would get an allotment, and they had in those days something called road men, the wholesalers. This was a service for the publishers. They would go to the mom and pop stores and they would say "You've got 20 copies, you have 8 left -" this was 10 days after it went on sale - "you've got 8 left, you're going to sell X amount," they had it all figured out. As soon as it went on sale it moved fast, then it would slow down, then it would stop. They could figure out approximately what was the sales were going to be at each store by their roadman's 10 day checkup, and the 10 day checkup on *Crime Patrol* and *War Against Crime* suddenly started going up, and Bill said "We're on to something." He says let's drop *Crime Patrol*, make it *Crypt of Terror*, let's drop *War Against Crime* and make it the *Vault of Horror*, and let's do horror. And he said "I'd like you to write 'em" and I said I can't, I can only write my own stuff and draw it. Well he pressed me on that for a while, but we started the titles and then I introduced something called the Witches Cauldron in *Crypt of*

*Terror*, and that became *The Haunt of Fear*, his own title. Bill was very ambitious at that point because things were looking better and better. We were starting to sell well, it looked like we were going to be successful, and we were doing something that nobody else was doing. And that's about how we got into the horror comics.

Bill is now, you know, feeling his oats, we've got three comic books that are doing very well, and he's got a few of his father's stuff left. And he's pressing me to

write all the stuff, and I finally relented and I said you know I'm going to have to give up my artwork and write stories for everybody else, and he said "Well I'll pay you for it." He made me an associate editor, he gave me an editorial fee, and I was writing them, and I said "I can't plot all these stories," and he said "Don't worry about it, I will read, I have insomnia." He *thought* he had insomnia. What he has was he was taking dexedrine pills, which you could get over the counter as diet pills, and he was taking them at dinner time so he wouldn't eat too much, because he was always on a diet, and he wired



Weird Science #13 (1950)

for the night! So he was up and he was reading, and his idea was he would come in with springboards - he called them springboards - they were swipes! Plots, ideas, whatever. He'd read an H.P. Lovecraft story and he'd come in and say, oh whatever, story of a guy who kills his wife and has to get rid of the body, and so he buys a lot of ketchup (laughter) and anyway, so we would meet every morning and he would tell me his springboards and I would plots the stories.



So one day he said to me "What do you know about science fiction?" and I said I don't know anything about science fiction. He said "Well I love science fiction. Take these home and read them." He gives me two copies of *Astounding Science Fiction*, John Campbell's pulp magazine. I go home and I read an Isaac Asimov story and a Ray Bradbury story and I come back I say "I can do this!" (laughter) I was a big, pardon the language, bullshit artist. So we started the science fiction comic books and my approach, because it was such a specific audience directed subject, and I want to make it into a mass media for a large amount of kids that weren't quite up to the level of Campbell's science fiction was. I started to do like laboratory things, you know, and robots and simple stuff. Then I get into the aliens when the UFO's were flying all over the United States. So now we had two science fiction books, and when he saw the kind of writing I was doing, with the snap endings, you know, the twists, and he wanted a couple more books, so he says let's put a couple more so we did, we put out *Shock SuspenStories*, *Crime Suspense Stories*. *Shock SuspenStories* became my baby, because there I could have fun with racial intolerance stories, religious intolerance stories, stories about crooked politicians, corrupt police people, we were on the edge you know? We were doing all this stuff and it was fun. I was a liberal back then so we were doing things about anti-Semitism, the persecution of blacks in the south, and stuff like that. Of course, none of that came out when the terrible things that followed when the Kefauver committee was formed and we were thrown out of business.

So there we were, we're publishing five titles, and a kid walks in one day, looks like a little rabbit (laughter) kind of balding, kind of buck teethed, named Harvey Kurtzman. Very funny stuff he shows us. He shows us *Hey Look!*, which I think he was doing for Stan Lee I think, little one page mime jokes and stuff. And I asked him if he can draw. Let me backtrack a moment here. One of the things when I started to take over editorship of the whole EC line, I convinced bill about something that had been deep in my heart,

was that too many artists were being asked to imitate another artist. "Draw like Wayne Boring, Superman! That's what I want!" And I said to Bill, "You know, we got some really talented kids. Look at Jack Davis, look at his style! Everybody should draw in their own style." Graham Ingles was struggling at Bills office before I got there, doing romance you know? He was not a straight artist, he was not like Johnny Craig, an illustrator. He had his own style, but when the Old Witch was created and we gave it to him, I said "Have fun with this," he came up with he came out with that drippy, wonderful, horror illustration style. We gave him the name Ghastly and



*Shock SuspenStories* #11 (1953)

made a star out of him.

Ok so Kurtzman comes in and he's got this interesting style and I said hey I'd like you to do artwork for me, and I was pretty overwhelmed by the amount of books that I had to do, and I asked him can you write, do you write, and he said yes, I do. I said ok write some stories for me in horror and science fiction, he says I don't like to do horror, so I said listen, just do it! So he did a few horror stories but he begged off after



a while, and he wrote a couple of sci-fi stories, and Bill said you know I'd like to expand the business, you can't do any more, what are we going to do? And Johnny Craig was the only guy that was writing his own stories, but I was writing for everybody else. And a funny aside about that, when we'd have a story conference, Bill in later years used to say, "Until I got Al Feldstein to accept an idea, my stomach would turn into knots!" (laughter) And what he didn't realize, or had forgotten, was that Al Feldstein was assigned, that day, to write for Jack Kamen, or for that day to write for Jack Davis. These guys have entirely different styles, and I couldn't do a *Father Knows Best* whacks his wife for Jack Davis, because Jack Davis can't draw that kind of stuff, but Jack Kamen could. So when we were doing these story conferences, I would be looking for the plot and the subject matter and the characters that would fit a style, fit the style of one of the artists. I said to Bill, you know, you want to expand? Give this guy Kurtzman his own book. So we kicked it around with Harvey and Harvey said he would like to do it, and we said you know, we're not doing anything like in the He Man Adventure kind of stuff. Let's do

something with He Man Adventure, and Harvey said OK. So we came up with this *Two-Fisted Tales* idea. I did a story in the first issue myself, I wrote it and drew it, and Harvey wrote a few and then he's just took over and started writing it all. Then we gave him another book about war, *Front Line Combat*. Now *Front Line Combat* when we brainstormed it we talked to Harvey about it and we said look, we don't want any buck-toothed Japs or Koreans or whatever

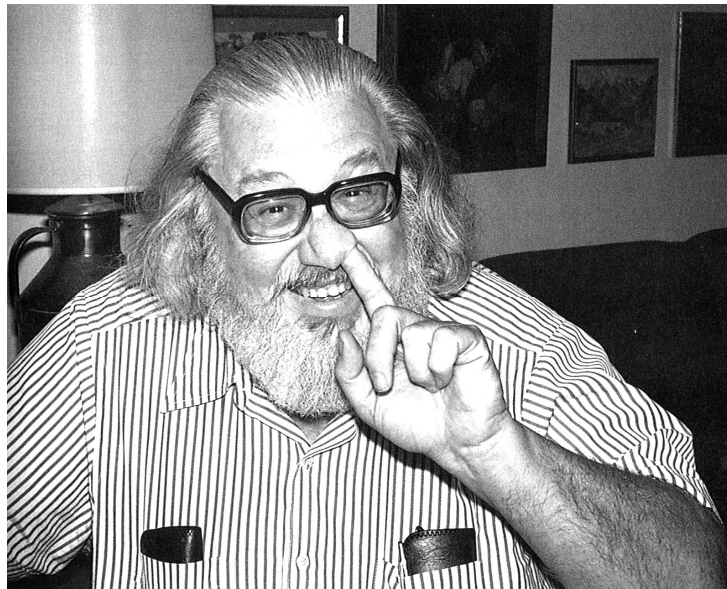
it was at the time. Let's do war stories like *All Quiet on The Western Front* where you really talk about the horrors of war, or the fact that there are humans fighting humans and everybody had their own problems and everything else.

So Harvey was doing *Front Line Combat* so we had these nine titles or whatever it was and Bill was, you know, he was a very successful publisher. Harvey is doing these two books, I'm doing seven. Harvey's

getting jealous. I was making three-and-a-half times what he's making. Bill says "You want to make more money? Do another book." Harvey says all right, and Harvey was sickly, he was in the hospital, and so we have a brainstorming session, and this is important because this is a piece of history that there are many opinions about, and I have mine, or not opinions but concepts about. We have this brainstorming session and what will we do for the third book? And I said Harvey Kurtzman came in here with the most hysterical we ever read: Hey Look! There's nothing out there in comic book land for adults that's funny. There's Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck and the funny little animals, but there's no adult thing like the adult stuff, and I



Harvey Kurtzman



Bill Gaines in later years

say adult in quotes, that we were writing in our horror and our sci-fi and our crime, and what Harvey was doing in *Front Line Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*. And I said we should do a more adult kind of humor comic book, and we kick that around and then we said what will we call it? I said well you know, when I introduce *Tales From the Crypt* and *Crypt of Terror*, I say "Welcome to EC's mad mag, The Crypt of Terror! I got a story for you today! The Crypt Keeper used to

say this. I said "Why don't we call it EC's Mad Mag?", and Harvey says "Why don't we just call it *Mad*?" And Johnny Craig, who was lying on the couch, says for the side thing -because we always had that side thing: terror, horror, etc - Johnny says we could call it "Humor in a Jugular Vein!" So Johnny came up with that. And that's how *Mad* was born.

For the first few issues were Harvey's idea of satirizing what we were publishing, and I think he got a big kick out of making fun of us, you know. He

hated what we did, so he would do a funny horror story, and a funny crime story, and a funny sci-fi story in *Mad*, the early comics, and it was OK, but the damn thing wasn't selling. Bill by that time had remarried and had gotten an apartment uptown so he was no longer driving me home, I had to take the subway, so I used to walk with Harvey to the subway. I went downtown to Brooklyn, he went uptown to wherever he was living, somewhere in upper Manhattan, and I said "You know Harvey, there's a lot more than making fun of EC comics in your comic book in your satire." There's satire which is a fantastic subject for everything. Lots of things you can make fun of: literature or books, you can make fun of movies, you can make fun of television, you can make fun of a planned obsolescence and all the stuff that we were being subjected to you know. So he thought about it for a while. Harvey had a great sense of listening to criticisms and rejecting them and then coming up with them about three months later. (laughter) So with *Mad*, he started to move away and started to do satires.

He did *The Lone Stranger* which was a comic strip. He was sick, and we needed an inside cover, and

we'd been doing the "Artist of the Issue" on each of our inside covers and that stuff, and I said to Bill we ought to do something funny in *Mad*, even though we were usurping his job, it was his book, but we had to get it done. So I suggested that instead of just doing Harvey or Jack or Bill Elder or whoever, why don't we do the "Publisher of the Issue?" Why don't we do a really crazy bio of you, you know, like you used to be in porn like the rest of the publishers in comics, and you're a pervert and you like little girls, and so on. And we write this thing and we put it in and Harvey

has conniption, I mean he's upset as hell, but the damn book was, that cover was, part of what was forming the future of *Mad*. Because at the same time, and I'm not sure whether the "Publisher of the Issue" came before or the same issue as *Super-Duper Man*, and then suddenly the damn thing took off and was a success.

So there we were with all of our titles and doing very well and enjoying our lives, and somewhere out there in the insane world of the United States, people started to complain about the fact that there was juvenile delinquency. Kids were rebelling. How dare they! Kids were doing terrible things, they were questioning their parents, how dare they! There was an Austrian psychiatrist named Frederick Wertham and

he had a clinic up in Harlem, and he observed that all of his incorrigible kids read comics, and he figured comics was causing juvenile delinquency. So he wrote a couple books and then he wrote *Seduction of the Innocent*, and he blamed - I mean the fact that the kids were drinking milk, or playing baseball, or breathing air, he didn't blame those. When I first took over *Mad* I did a Dr. Frederick Worthless "Baseball is Ruining Our Children" strip, same kind of mindset you know? Anyway then there was a guy out there named



Mad Magazine #1 (1952)



[illegible][illegible]

But anyway, so Kefauver decides he's going to do a Senate investigation into juvenile delinquency, and he grabs this Dr. Frederick Wertham as a star witness. Well I'm subpoenaed to appear in private and I go and I do my thing, Bill demands that he be heard in

There was another group that had an agenda, beside the

two that I had mentioned, and that was the people that wanted to stick their foot in the door and start to censorship of the press, and where but to start getting the laws passed than to attack the defenseless comic book industry, which was splintered and not very



organized, and not very cooperative with each other? And then there was another group which was the worst of all, which was our competitors. They were pissed at us! Because we were taking the dimes away from their funny little animals and Superman characters, and we were publishing comic books that were very popular and selling a lot. So they wanted us out of business. There was another thing, a lot of them had skeletons in their closet. There were guys, I won't mention names because I don't want you to get in trouble, actually I think it's public knowledge there were guys that were the heads of major companies, one had been a porn publisher, soft core porn. The other had been the accountant for the Ladies Garment Workers Union - pinko! (laughter) So you know they didn't want their pasts to be dug up so they said "We'll start a code, we'll get rid of everything, we'll be good boys!" you know. So they initiated the Comic Book Code Authority, this code of comic book acceptable material and they appointed a Czar, Judge Murphy, and they put us out of business. The code said you can't have the word horror, you can't have the word weird, the word terror, you can't show zombies, you can't show ghosts, you can't show policeman in a bad light - they just took everything we were doing and they outlawed it all.

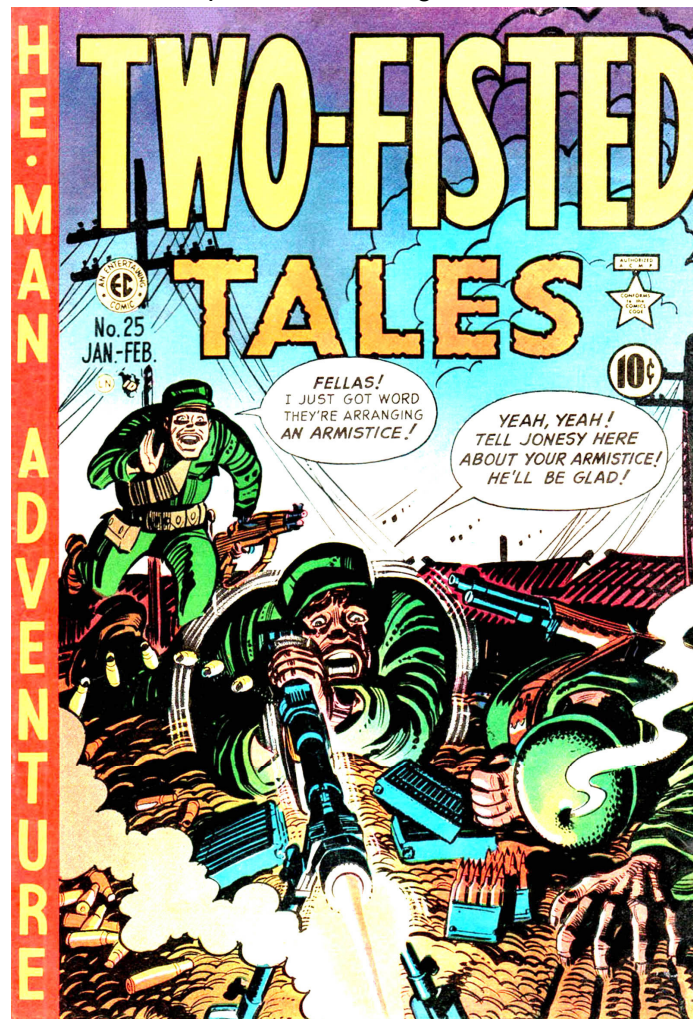
Bill called a press conference and said "I'm dropping all my titles," he had to, he was being forced to do it and it was a shame, it was a terrible shame, but we were living then in an era of panic. Everybody was frightened about what these kids we're doing and the fact that we were having a crime spree of juvenile delinquency and what are we going to do? And they were young parents, many of them had been in the service and had been told what to do and they wanted somebody to tell them what to do, and Dr. Spock wrote a book to tell them what to do, and it was a big hit because he

was an authority. And so we were put out of business. We tried some other stuff. But prior to the proverbial hitting-the-fan with the Kefauver committee, Harvey had come to Bill and said "Look, I just got an offer from *Pageant Magazine* to be their humor editor," and Bill said "So? and he said "Well, I never liked comics." He was feeling the pressures that were beginning to build, and he never was really happy in comics anyway, he wanted to do more adult stuff I guess, I don't know. So he said this was a chance to get onto an another adult magazines staff, and Bill said "Why don't you make *Mad* into an adult magazine?" and that stopped him. So Harvey said

OK and that's how *Mad* was switched to this 25 cent *Time Magazine* sized black and white, not too many balloons you know, it didn't look like a comic book anymore. And he started that before the Code, and it was a magazine so it wouldn't have been subject to the code. Well Harvey didn't have a big "EC" on it either. That was smart. Because we tried Picto-Fiction to get away from the Code, I put "EC" on it like an idiot, because I wanted to get the old EC readers, I wanted them to know that the material that would now be outlawed, they could get a Picto-Fiction. It backfired though because bundles came back. Nobody wanted an EC label, nobody wanted a magazine distributed by the Leader News Company, which was our

distributor. Leader News, because they imitated our stuff and were caught up in this whole insanity, had to go bankrupt. They got clobbered as soon as all these magazines were being sent back by the wholesalers, including their own, which they "secretly" published.

So they go bankrupt and Bill comes to me one day and he says he owes, whatever it was, \$70 thousand, or \$100 thousand dollars worth of printing bills for the Picto-Fiction, Leader News went bankrupt, all the



*Two-Fisted Tales #25 (1952)*



advances are gone, all the settlements are gone, he had to stop publishing. "I'm sorry Al, I have to let you go, and everybody else." So I was out on the street. Harvey goes to him and says "Listen, *Mad* is OK, *Mad* is doing well, let's get a new distributor. All we have to do is pay off the printing bills. You and your mother and your sister will own the magazine." This is a big thing for Bill, and his mother and his sister and invest and pay the bills that ordinarily they would have been able to pay if Leader News hadn't gone bankrupt. So Harvey talks him into continuing *Mad*, I'm out on the street writing for Stan Lee and pounding the pavement and Hugh Hefner comes to

Harvey and says "How'd you like to do a real fancy *Playboy*-type humor magazine like *Mad* but better and I'll give you a real wide open budget," blah, blah, blah and Harvey said here's my chance. I can have color, I can have slick paper, and Harvey you know, he was ambitious and he was very talented. I will never take that away from Harvey, he was a hugely talented guy, but you know what he needed, he needed help, he needed reigning in, and reigning out. He needed both, he needed encouragement and also control. Anyway Harvey doesn't know what to do, so he comes to Bill and he says "I want 51% control of the magazine," which is a ruse because he knows Bill is going to fire him. He didn't have the guts to say "I know I talked your mother and sister and you into putting

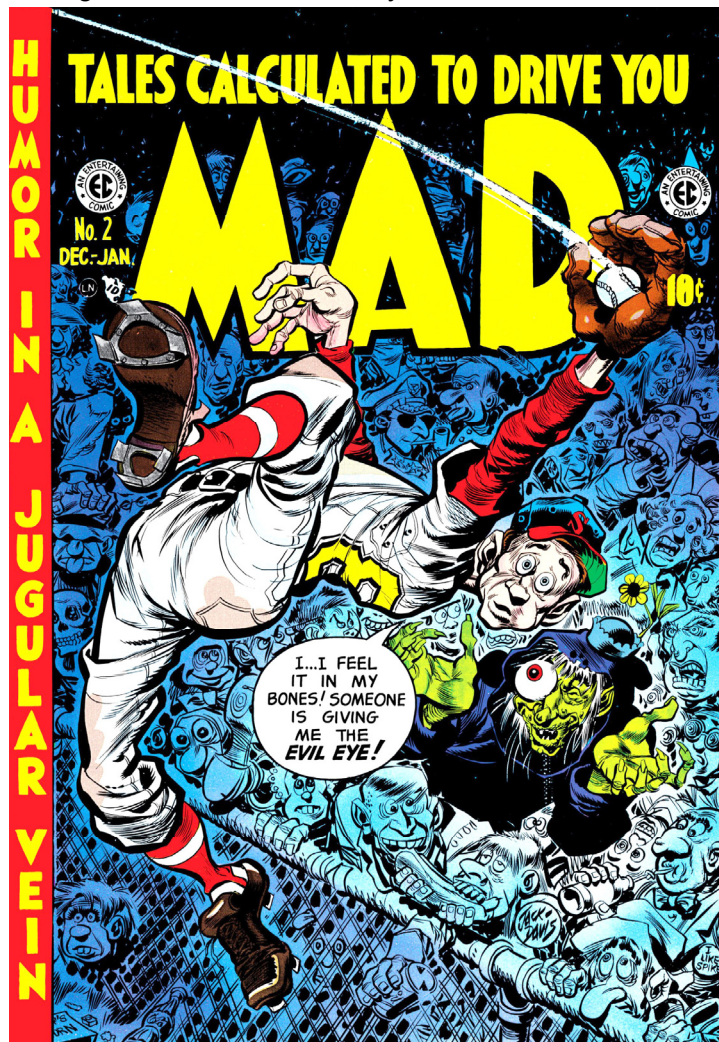
up the money to keep *Mad* going. I haven't got the guts to tell you that I quit and I'm going to Hugh Hefner." He demanded this and Bill called up Lyle Stewart his manager, who had also been let go when I had been let go, and he said Harvey is demanding 51% of the magazine. And I understand Lyle said "Is he near a window?" (laughter) and Bill says yeah Lyle says "Throw him out!"

Bill says what am I going to do? What about *Mad*? He was in a panic. When we had the two sci-fi magazine and weren't doing too well, we combined them into one and Bill gave me an opportunity to do another magazine and I said everybody is imitating *Mad*, let's imitate *Mad*. This was back with the comics. So I had done *Panic*. So I'm coming home from New York, pounding the pavement, a freelancer again, hating it, and there's Bill waiting for me at the train station. I said "What the hell are you doing here?" and he said he had fired Harvey. I said "No kidding, why?" and he said "Well he demanded a lot, I let him go. How would you like to come back to work for me?" and I said "I'd

love to" and he said "What can we do?" he was the one who asked, knowing damn well what I'd say and knowing what he wanted. And I said "What do you mean what will we do, we'll do *Mad*! He left it, it's doing well." And in my portfolio that I'm walking around with is a magazine dummy of a showcase of iconoclast humorists like Lenny Bruce and Bob & Ray and Shelly Burman and the rest of them. I had this idea of making a place where people who weren't getting published would be able to be published. And so I said "Yeah, let's do *Mad*!"

So I introduced that element that I had, which was my dummy, into *Mad* as soon as I took it over. And of course the most significant thing that I did, which I was very lucky about, was that Ballantine Books had put out a

paperback book of the early comics, *Mad* comics, called *The Mad Reader*, and the editor the magazine had put on the cover this face. This crude, grinning idiot kid that had been around for years, no name or anything like that, and that was on *The Mad Reader* and Harvey had started to play with it in the magazine, I think he put it on that little border that he had as "our founder" but it was badly drawn. When I



*Mad Magazine* #2 (1953)



took *Mad* I said to myself "You know that's a goldmine, that little face, we ought to adopt it as our mascot." Playboy's got the rabbit, we live in an image/corporate world - Aunt Jemima, The Smith Brothers, the RCA dog, you know everybody had a visual logo. This was before we've got very sophisticated and went into the graphical logos we have now. It was more fun of those days, I mean everybody had a picture you know? I said I'm going to adopt him as our logo. So I put it an ad into *The New York Times*, portrait artist wanted by a national magazine for a special project. This little guy walks in, a little moustache, I thought he was old I thought at the time - I'm old now - he must have been in his 60s, guy named Norman Mingo. Sketch artist and renderer for advertising art. Shows me his portfolio and asks what national magazine is this and I said it's *Mad*, and he says goodbye! (laughter) So I said wait, look at this project that I have and I showed him all these cards and posters and junk of this kid that had been drawn by innumerable artists, you know this funny face. I said I want a definitive portrait of this boy, I want it to have a kind of dumb look and yet intelligent behind his eyes, and to give off the impression that no matter how the world is lousy, if you maintain a sense of humor you can get through it, that kind of thing. And he did the definitive portrait of Alfred E. Neuman, he painted it, and I ran it on the cover of *Mad Magazine* #30, which is only my second issue that I was editing, as a write in candidate for president against Stevenson and Eisenhower, and I understand we got votes! (laughter) Because those days when young people were a little more flexible than they are now. That was the beginning of Alfred.

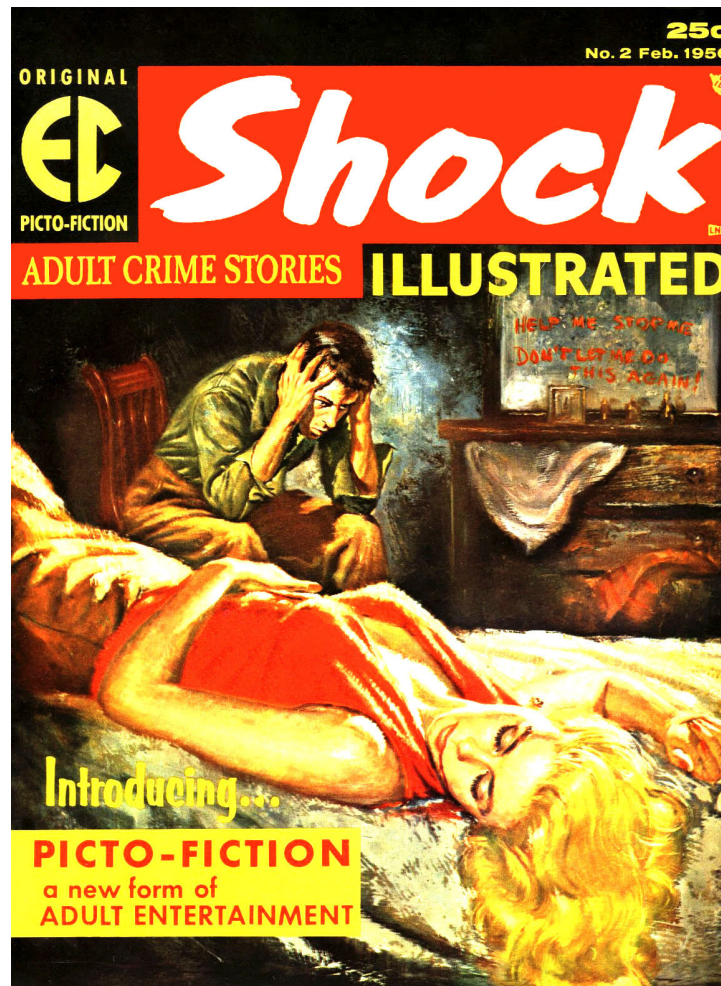
The name came from a nom de plume that I had used when we tried *Picto-Fiction*. If you take the new *Picto-*

*Fiction* set that was just put out by Russ Cochran and you go through it and you look at the index pages, you'll see Al Feldstein wrote one story, Maxwell Williams wrote one story, which was William Maxwell Gaines, which was my nom de plume. Alfred Neuman wrote one story! (laughter) I didn't want them to know I was doing all of my old stories into the *Picto-Fiction*, so I gave nom de plumes for all the stories that I wrote. So that's how I gave him this name, I just decided I would give him this name, Alfred E. Neuman. I thought it was a funny name. I took a

magazine from Harvey when it was selling 375,000 copies an issue, quarterly if he could make the deadlines, and I took it to 2.8 million copies, published eight times a year, with 250 paperback reprint titles and originals, 11 foreign editions, it was translated into all foreign languages, including English (laughter) for England, and annuals with records all kinds of inserts. It was a cash cow.

And one more story which you might be interested in, and that's how I made my money, finally. Because I never really got rich with EC. I did all the work and I got enough income to stay alive and maybe buy a house on Long Island. In 1959, I've taken over the magazine, I'm running it for four years and we're

starting to do very well, I got a new distributor, I got it up to 475,000 copies bi-monthly, six times a year, and it's doing very well. Money is piling up in the coffers at EC because Bill is letting it sit there. We had at that time, and this is something young people don't about or are not familiar with but you can look it up, was a progressive income tax. It was instituted by Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democratic Congress at the time to pay for the war that Pearl Harbor had caused. If you made over a certain amount of money a year, you went into these progression of taxes up to 90%! I mean if you made a hundred grand a year the



*Shock Illustrated* #2 (1956)

next thousand was probably taxed at 93%. It started somewhere around 85% at seventy five grand. There were no big CEO.'s making millions like today, there were no movie stars making millions like today, that tax was murderous but it paid for a lot of things and it paid for the war. So the IRS walks into Bill's office and says you've got a million dollars in surplus, what are you going to do with it? Either you reinvestment in the corporation or you have to declare a dividend and pay it to your stockholders, because they wanted that 85% or whatever, the individual income tax on it. Well Bill and his mother and sister had money from Max's windfall when he sold out to National (DC) his partnership, so they had a lot of money, and they had an income. And that money, that million dollars, would have been taxed at 85%, 90%. eighty five percent, because each of them had an income. So they would have ended up, out of the million, with maybe a hundred and fifty grand split three ways, maybe fifty grand each.

We had a shop accountant who told Bill, you sell the magazine to a company that's got a tax loss and you tell them you have a present for them. I'm going to give you, for a million dollars down, and X amount of dollars in profits, for a total of X amount of dollars, a magazine that is doing very well. How can you turn it down? It's a gift, nothing out of their pocket, and Bill gets his million dollars as a down payment on the five million dollars he put on the magazine, he thought that was a lot of money, and he only had to pay 33% capital gains. That's a lot different. Now they're splitting six hundred and sixty thousand dollars instead of a hundred and fifty and they all did well. And I went to Bill and said "Damn! You have this party, you have this pie, you're not going to give me a slice? I'm not asking for 51% like Harvey, but you could at least let me share with this thing," I got it going again, it's doing well. And Bill says "Tell you what I'll give it to you now," he's giving away what he doesn't have anymore and doesn't care, he says " I'll give you a percentage of the profits and we'll make it the gross, not the net," because if they make it the net, they're going to take off the Cadillacs and whatever else, because in those days with the progressive income tax everybody was looking for some tax shelter or other you know, so that everything was perks and all kinds of stuff that they don't need now. And he gave me a contract which give me a percentage of Mad, of the gross, and we were selling at that time about 475,000 as I mentioned, and that meant that I would make about \$3500 more a year, which was very nice for a guy that was being paid fifteen grand at the time. Well I

took the magazine to 2.8 million, and then he would go around bragging that I was the highest paid editor in the world! (laughter) I sad Bill that's not true, Harry Luce and Hugh Hefner make much more than I do. Harold Ross makes more than I do, from *The New Yorker*. And that was a how I got a ranch in Montana and I retired.

So you want to hear about the Gaines file copies, the one that when they first came out sold for like \$12,000 each? I was stupid when I was a kid. Well not stupid, but I didn't know there was going to be a collecting fandom. I used to bring home my copies and bring my kids three copies and take one and bind it in a volume. I told you about the bond, the second class entry bond. Bill was always concerned about getting his bond back if he decided to stop publishing a title. So he wanted to keep a record that he had adhered to the second class entry restrictions. That he didn't have more than two and a half pages of ads, etc. So he wrapped up 12 copies of everything he published, never thinking that this was going to be valuable stuff, just solely to have the record. That spilled out from a credenza he had in his office that finally got filled up with of the stuff we were publishing, and he moved it all to a storage warehouse along with all the artwork that was ever done. He was a squirrel, he put it all away because he knew that at least the artwork would be valuable, and he had these wrapped copies, mint copies. He raided it occasionally and gave away some or used it, but generally speaking, and when he died of course they found them, and that's the Gaines file copies! They were mint, wrapped in Kraft paper, and it wasn't because he thought they'd be valuable ever, it was because he wanted to protect his bonds. I was jealous as hell when he sold those things for that, because I didn't have anything. Who knew they would be valuable? I never saved anything!

**RD:** Well thank you Al for talking to us today.

**AF:** Well you're welcome very much, Rob. Thank you for having me, I enjoyed it and I hope that somebody gets some information out of it that they don't know or didn't know. I hope I provided you with some interesting anecdotes.

*This interview is taken from the video interview conducted with Al and can be found on Creator Chronicles: The Interviews 2007-2014, available on Bluray and a limited-edition signed DVD. For more information or to order this Bluray, please visit <http://www.amdalemedia.com/ccvideo.shtml>.*



# From Batman to Gotham: 50 years of Comic Book TV Heroes

## *Animated Shows Part 2*

Just like the *Batman* movie kicked off a renaissance in comic book moviemaking, *Batman: The Animated Series* did likewise for television in 1992. The big success of *Batman: TAS* paved the way for plans to be put into motion to bring out ever more comic book animated television shows. The 90s and 00s would prove to be a boom time for this resurging wave of comic book animated shows. More care would also be taken during this modern period to hew closer to the source material, certainly in spirit if not strictly in a literal sense.

The comic market was red hot at this time. 1991 had proven to be a banner year in the modern era with some comics reaching a million plus copies sold. Two of the best selling comic franchises had gone into animation production during this period, one was *Batman: The Animated Series* and the other was *X-Men: The Animated Series*.

Actually the X-Men had appeared on TV a few years earlier in the form of a test pilot in 1989. *Pryde of the X-Men* was produced in place of a 13th episode of *RoboCop: The Animated Series* by the struggling Marvel Entertainment Group in response to many years of fan demand for an X-Men cartoon. The pilot loosely followed the Kitty Pryde comics storyline when she joined the X-Men facing an amalgamation of The Brotherhood of Evil Mutants and The Hellfire Club. It had all the principal players with a decent degree of adherence to the sources, except for one glaring difference. Due to various aspects of the production with time and personnel available, the plum role of Canadian Wolverine was voiced by a distinctly *Australian* actor! This was roundly criticized as laughably inadequate, the pilot was met with mixed response, though mostly positive except for this howler of a gaffe.

The show lacked the more serious tones of the comic and was dumbed down with camp elements, much of which would be eschewed when the *X-Men: TAS* went into production a couple of years later. It only aired one time, but was widely seen by tape traders and later an official VHS release. Marvel Entertainment Group went through significant financial problems right after this pilot was produced, bringing an end

to the era of Marvel animation that began with *The Fantastic Four* cartoon in 1978. But it was enough to spur the reformed company to partner with Saban and green-light a proper animated version of the X-Men.

*X-Men: TAS* came out just two months after *Batman: TAS*. Produced by Saban and the revamped Marvel Entertainment Group, the show was an instant hit with animation and comic fans. Airing on the Fox network, X-Men: TAS would feature basically the 90s X-Men line up with a few personnel changes, eventually expanding the roster from past an present mutants and villains. Indeed, the show would so closely align with the spirit, and in some cases direct storylines, of the source comics that the deficiencies in the animation would be

overlooked in large part due to the fantastic storytelling and voice acting.

And oh, that animation. The animation duties were farmed out to South Korean studio AKOM, and when the two-part pilot was delivered it was in such an unfinished state that Fox threatened to pull the contracts. While this was eventually fixed, the animations were no where near the level of *Batman*, being of a much lower frame rate and with questionable fluidity and scaling.

Nevertheless, the show was embraced and even this simpler, less attractive animation style came to be accepted in its own charming way. Voice acting was handled by a Canadian studio and you better be sure they did Wolverine a lot better, if still not quite as Cannuck sounding as desired.

Many of the great X-Men storylines were included, and many of those were multi-parters. The most significant of those was the Phoenix Saga (5 parts) followed immediately by the Dark Phoenix Saga (4 parts) within the same season. Apocalypse, Cable, alternate timelines, Days of Future Past, the Gambit Mini Series, A Rogue's Tale, Sanctuary, and many more were utilized as the foundation for episodes, albeit modified a bit for Saturday morning airings and to fit within the continuity the show built for itself. Most divergences from the source



*The X-Men, Finally!*

were minimal and understandable, such as not having Phoenix destroy a world with billions of beings and then sacrifice her own life later. In the end, *X-Men: TAS* was a wonderful adaptation of the comic to television, and it is looked back on today as being a prime impetus for bringing the movies out later in the decade.

For a couple of years, *Batman: TAS* and *X-Men: TAS* had weekday afternoon cartoon super hero TV all to themselves. Then in 1994, Marvel expanded their offerings with three more classic comic series - *Fantastic Four*, *Iron Man* and *Spider-Man*. *Fantastic Four* and *Iron Man* were part of *The Marvel Action Hour* produced by New World Animation and sold to syndication.

*Spider-Man* in 1994 was unabashedly great and widely accepted by comic and animation fans. Produced by the newly formed Marvel Films Animation studio, it was the first time on TV that Spider-Man had been fully realized with faithful adherence to the source comics. Most of the episodes were adaptations of Spider-Man comics, which helped keep the series on track, even with inevitable differences that will occur when adapting to a different medium.

The voice acting was fantastic. Christopher Daniel-Barnes portrayed Spider-Man with all the appropriate wisecracking, and Peter with the angsty passion, the character is known for with a flair and subtlety well beyond the norm for most cartoons. Many other big stars filled the voice cast including Ed Asner, Roscoe Lee Brown, Eddie Albert, Hank Azaria, Majel Barrett, Nell Carter, David Warner, Martin Landau and even Mark Hamill as Hobgoblin.

The episodes were of a high quality and it was the first show to use computer animation for many of the swinging fly-throughs of New York City. The production went to great lengths to photograph many landmarks in the city to model in 3D on the computer, giving the setting a rare veracity. Other details such as cars and crowds were utilized to give life to the city.

The show was a huge hit, and is still considered one of the best animated series of all time. This series alone significantly boosted sales of all Spider-Man products and led to the character becoming mainstream.

Several sequel series were produced over the years since *Spider-Man: TAS*. The first was *Spider-Man Unlimited* and took a very different tack with Spider-Man's story. *Unlimited*

had a significantly more SciFi bent, taking place on Counter Earth fighting the High Evolutionary. In 2003, MTV took a crack at Spidey with a high-profile series that followed directly from the events of the first Spider-Man movie released that year. Titled *Spider-Man: The New Animated Series*, MTV spared no expense in getting major Hollywood talent to do the voices including Ed Asner, Neil Patrick Harris, Stan Lee, Rob Zombie, Michael Dorn, Michael Clarke Duncan, Keith David, Jeffrey Combs, Clancy Brown, Virginia Madsen, Gina Gershon, and Tara Strong, among many others!

*The Spectacular Spider-Man* would come along in 2008 and be regarded as the best Spider-Man series of them all. It would run for two only seasons, failing to secure additional episodes despite the high accolades, and renewal of the show would remain in doubt for nearly two years before the go-ahead was given to instead start a new series.



*In The Clutches of The Sinister Six!*

*Ultimate Spider-Man* was the result of the fallout of *Spectacular*, and was adapted from the comic book. The show would run for four seasons, but would be seen as a bit of a let down after the previous series. This was due in large part to the overuse of humor and dumbing-down to make it more accessible to kids, alienating much of the existing fan base.

For *Fantastic Four* in 1994, Marvel created *The Marvel Action Hour* weekend block.

This was paired with an *Iron Man* show for the 2<sup>nd</sup> half, and the block would later be renamed Marvel Action Universe. *Fantastic Four* had a catchy, though repetitive, theme song with lots of animation, but the show proved to be too goofy to hold the gravitas and interpersonal dynamics of the comic. This would be the central problem that has plagued all *Fantastic Four* attempts to date, and one hopes that someday it will be done right, because it misses all that is great about the World's Greatest Comic Magazine.

On the plus side, the episodes contained fairly accurate retellings of the comic stories, finally giving us a proper Galactus/Silver Surfer story for the first time in animation. The animation was a bit thin though, and the incessant additions of "humorous" moments detracted from what could have been

*Iron Man* filled out the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the hour, and it too suffered from many of the same problems as the *Fantastic Four*'s first season. While not quite as campy, *Iron Man* suffered from simplistic storylines and stiff acting and characters. A good



complement of villains were on tap to help, but none were developed sufficiently much beyond "villain of the week" status. Virtually none of the first season episodes were taken from the comics except in the broadest sense.

Things would improve on both shows in their second season, as the shows received a major overhaul due to poor ratings and fan reception. The animation studio was changed, resulting in improved visuals, and the theme song for *Iron Man* was changed to now classic hammer-on-anvil guitar theme with the phrase "I Am Iron Man!" being repeated over it. The height of the show was Mandarin, having spent both seasons collecting the rings, finally confronts Iron Man by using the rings to render all technology useless. The character would also cross over into the *Hulk* and *Spider-Man* animated shows a couple of times as well.

Over on *Fantastic Four*, the changes consisted of revamped and more complex storylines, which drew more from John Byrne's FF run, along with more mature characters and writing. Despite the big improvements, both shows would be cancelled at the end of their second seasons. A third season of each had been planned, which would have had more of seasonal story arcs, but ratings and opinion had not improved enough to justify continuing them.

The opposite case happened with *The Incredible Hulk* show in 1996. The tone was way dark and serious, befitting the character but throwing casual viewers off a bit. The show aired on UPN, and even featured original Hulk Lou Ferrigno as the voice of the Hulk. The show was one of the better interpretations of the character, and like the *Fantastic Four* and *Iron Man* shows, it ran two seasons.

These series and episodes in this middle period were a mixed bag. Overall pretty good, but with some notable exceptions for comics fans, especially the *Fantastic Four* first season. Still worth a look and much better done overall than in other incarnations in times past.

As the 90s drew to a close, Marvel brought out two more series, *Silver Surfer* and *The Avengers: United They Stand*. Debuting in 1999, *Avengers: United They Stand* was well received even though it was missing several key characters, including Thor, Iron Man and Captain America due to licensing issues. The show was basically West Coast Avengers and while it received mixed reviews at the time, it nevertheless led to further interest in the group. This would

become essential a few years later as Fox had the movie rights to the Fantastic Four characters, and when it came time for Marvel to join their heroes together, *The Avengers* got the nod and went on to become a massive hit. Animated series like these laid some of the groundwork with the general public for these characters.

Silver Surfer debuted in 1998 and ran for a single season. The show was very faithful to the character, properly capturing Norrin Radd's tortured, noble nature. The design of the show combined cel animation with computer animation for things like ships to give it a unique look. The production also leaned heavily on the classic stories and even evoked Kirby in its rendering, lending the show a stylish look. The show hewed closely to the comic sources, and while it included the Surfer's relationship with Galactus, once again the Fantastic Four element of this part of his story was removed. It also featured serialized storytelling and dealt with social and political issues, the environment, slavery, and imperialism. Heady stuff for a kids show! The show likely would have gone on at least another season, as eight episodes had been scripted, but a legal dispute with Saban nixed that.

DC spent most of the 90s on TV animation extending the Batman universe, first with additional episodes of *Batman: TAS* then with various spin-offs. Two years later, *The New Batman Adventures* debuted, running two seasons and essentially extending the animated series in all but name.

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*The Not-Quite Fantastic Four*

The one big exception to the above was the production of the nearly equally fantastic *Superman: The Animated Series*. *Superman* was more of an action/adventure/drama with humor handled from a character and their situations standpoint, rather than slapstick or camp. Along with a more mature take and production that was similar to *Batman TAS*, a result of bringing over many of that show's production people, the show was one of the best interpretations of the character. Starring Tim Daly as Clark/Superman and Dana Delany as Lois, the show sparkled with a fun wit and banter that has been lacking in *Superman* ever since. *Superman* was significantly de-powered in this go round, giving him much more relatability and raising the effort and heroism accordingly.

The show ran four "seasons" but the third season was short and it was cancelled with only three episodes airing in the fourth. The show left off with a massive cliffhanger, with the last two episodes being a full-on invasion of earth by

Darkseid who brainwashes Superman to be his pawn! Even though he would defeat Darkseid, Superman is left with the fallout of his actions while under Darkseid's control, and a sentence of death is declared on him! Both the *Superman* and *Batman: TAS* shows would be repackaged and rerun in various forms for years afterwards.

Along with the various animated series during this time, DC and Marvel started to produce animated movies. Most of these would end up as direct-to-video, but some would get theatrical runs. Initially these movies were spin-offs from the *Batman: TAS*, as the first four movies produced were Batman features for the first 10 years. At the start it ended up being a movie about every three or four years. Then that pace has increased from at least one per year starting in 2006 until today where DC alone has anywhere from 4 to 6 animated movies coming out *per year*.

***Batman Beyond: The Return of The Joker*** was the third DC animated movie, released in 2000, and became notorious for having to be extensively edited for violence and language. Eventually it would be released on home video in its uncut form, but it raised quite a stir at the time.

Many acclaimed DC series and stories have been turned into animated movies including *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Justice League: New Frontier*, *Superman: Doomsday*, *All-Star Superman*, *Batman: Year One*, *Justice League: The Flashpoint Paradox*, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, and recently *Teen Titans: The Judas Contract*.

Marvel would also plumb the depths of its classic stories, though their output wouldn't quite be as extensive as DC's. Notable are *Ultimate Avengers*, *Hulk Versus* and *Planet Hulk*, *Iron Man*, *Doctor Strange*, and some team-ups including an *Avengers* movie.

As the new millennium dawned, comic book companies would become more involved in the final result of the product. Compared to the previous times when they mostly would just sell a license and let the licensee take it from there, there would be a much more hands-on approach, particularly at Warners where they largely owned the product and most of the production and distribution themselves. Warner's tended to be more hands-on with their animation properties, and since at least *Batman: TAS* have had a significant amount of creative control and input, tending towards total near the end of the 90s.

Marvel would be much more involved with their animated series as well, with more effort being made toward fidelity and accuracy applied to the shows which proved the original stories were sufficient. This attention would be applied to the later movies and lead directly to their broad appeal to the mass audience as well as comic fans.

To coincide with the first *X-Men* movie that was being released in 2000, Film Roman was tapped to produce the next animated series for Marvel, ***X-Men: Evolution***. The show followed the classic X-Men comics with the team primarily fighting the Brotherhood and both sides trying to recruit newly discovered mutants. Seasons three and four get a much more serious tone and brought in Apocalypse and his Four Horsemen for a final showdown. The series got mixed reviews, with the stories and characters considered too lightweight until the later seasons.

This would be followed a few years later by ***Wolverine and The X-Men***, moving Wolverine firmly to the forefront of the X-Verse. While it was animated well, here Wolverine was

a towering, lanky figure which was visually awkward and at odds with all other incarnations of the character. While the show had very high ratings, only one season would be produced due to Disney buying out Marvel, while Fox still owned the film rights to X-Men. This would be the last X-Men series to air to date.

Another attempt was made at a *Fantastic Four* series in 2006, after two poorly received movies. ***Fantastic Four: World's Greatest***

***Heroes*** would turn out to be quite a good show, blending original story ideas with classic takes. Unfortunately, the show had a very erratic airing schedule, jumping all over the place and even switching networks before being dumped. It might have become more if it had been given a proper chance.

*Iron Man* would follow in 2009 with ***Iron Man: Armored Adventures*** and run for two seasons. The show got a boost by coming out after the first *Iron Man* movie, which was a huge hit. The show would play out in almost serialized fashion, with the first season covering the Rings saga, and the second adapting *Armor Wars*. The show would be largely computer generated in a style that mimicked cel animation, a technique that was becoming more prevalent at this time. While receiving mostly positive reviews, some took issue with the much younger "teen" Tony Stark origin.



*The (West Coast) Avengers*



That same year, *The Super Hero Squad Show* would debut and despite only running two seasons, it would become one of the best reviewed and fun comic book shows in years. Going full out as a kids show, this version would play more like Toy Story, with knowing nods to Marvel characters, sly and witty humor, and an overtly cartoonish animation style. This approach worked significantly better than just trying to simplify and kid-ify a straight show, as everyone was in on the joke, so the self-aware parody played better.

*Hulk and the Agents of S.M.A.S.H.* would debut in 2013 and run two seasons, to middling reaction. A good voice cast and animation couldn't save the series from its reliance on gags, slapstick and fourth-wall breaking that fell flat.

Rounding out the most recent Marvel series are *Avengers Assemble* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and while they are not direct sequels, the shows would capitalize on the appeal and audience of the source movies but move in their own directions. Both shows are quite good and faithful to the tone and feel of their movies while providing their own creative directions.

Over on DC's side of the fence, the company would capitalize on the Batman series' success by going in a very different and exciting direction. *Batman Beyond* would debut in 1999 and would move the story of Bruce Wayne many years into the future. Taking place in 2039, Batman has long since retired due to age but a new Batman is poised to take his place. In the future city of Neo-Gotham, Terry McGinnis will ally with Bruce to bring a super high-tech Batman back to the city. The show is inventive, fun and a real extension of the Batman universe, and Bruce's story. The character and this future would appear in a couple of other DC Animated Universe episodes, and be concluded in a *Justice League Unlimited* episode.

Several more Batman shows would follow over the years, starting with *The Batman* in 2004, *Batman: Brave and the Bold* in 2008, which would team Batman with other heroes, and *Beware The Batman* in 2013. Most would only run a couple of seasons, but they extended the DC and *Batman: TAS* universes. All were good quality shows with many fun elements.

DC would expand their animation offerings in the 2000's with many shows that would follow a more cohesive production and quality level than most other competing efforts. This would include *Static Shock* in 2000, *The Zeta Project* in

2001, a *Batman Beyond* spin-off, *Teen Titans* in 2003 and a more kid-friendly version, *Teen Titans GO!* in 2013, *Krypto the Superdog* in 2005, *Green Lantern: The Animated Series* in 2011, which was much better than the movie it tied into, and *Young Justice* in 2010. Many of these shows would be highly acclaimed and win many awards. They represent a very nice swathe of DC Comics history and popular franchises, and due to the integration of Warner Bros production pipeline, quality of both animation and story would maintain a high standard.

The series that was the capstone for DC was *Justice League* in 2001. The show would be renamed *Justice League Unlimited* after the second season and lead to a more recent *Justice League Action* series that airs presently. This was one of the best animated series of all time, getting nearly everything right with an exciting show that tapped into the deep lore of the DC comics universe, fantastic characterization and interaction, and excellent storytelling and animation. Several shows would cross over into *Justice League* as well as them appearing in some of the above mentioned shows over the years.

The reach and impact of *Justice League* would reverberate throughout all the series that followed, pushing them to strive to live up to the quality. *Justice League Action* would follow the *Teen Titans GO!* style more, with more humor and a bit simpler characters and stories.



*The Silver Surfer and Galactus, Once Again*

Steady improvements in animation quality would continue throughout the post-Millennial period and would generally reach a solid level, even given the predilection to use less expensive animation houses. Today, most super hero animated TV and movies are quite pleasing to look at, though the storylines and feel can vary a bit more. Still, overall and compared to even the beginning of this post-Batman: *TAS* period, animated shows and movies today deliver a much closer-to-the-comic experience that fans have been hoping for a long time now. Animation always held the promise of being able to provide the best, most accurate and truest expression of comic characters and their stories, and the ever-improving animated series have finally delivered on that promise.

## Jef Parker and the Beginning of Collector's Edge Comics (continued)

The centerpiece of the store that everyone remembers was the main rack of comics that ran down the center of the store. It was custom-built and had the boxes running down the length like most shops have to this day, but the real treat was the front side facing the display cases. The entire front was a giant art piece done by a local artist that featured a ton of comic characters, mostly Marvel, in a giant flowing montage all the way down its length. The drawings were very stylized, almost cartoony, given the size and materials to work with, which was basically a drywall drawn in marker and paints for color. Everyone marveled (heh) at it nonetheless.

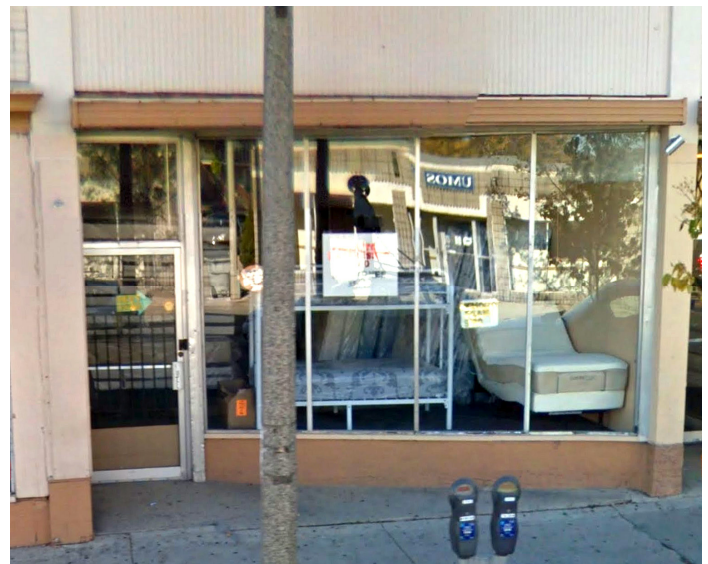


Comic book dealers Dave Gorski (left) and Jeff Keller

*The only known photo of Excalibur Comics as it was in 1982*

The walls at the front half of the store had many movie posters. I remember some of them, mostly the Superman The Movie logo and one of the most prized possessions, an original Star Wars 6 sheet movie poster. The thing was HUGE! People would comment on it all the time, and more than one several-hundred-dollar offer on the spot was turned down for it. The place had no heat, so in winter time a huge, long, red 5000BTU blower blew hot air through the back storage room doorway. It only helped a little, it never really got warm in there. When I wasn't stopping in on my way back from school, I would ride my 20" bike, which I was allowed to bring into the store and put it in the back. The store now houses a mattress company, and they have knocked out part of the wall into the adjacent retail space to open up the area.

The store was co-owned by Dave Gorski and Jeff Keller, two lifelong comics fans turned businessmen. Dave was an interesting fellow, mostly serious but with a wicked sense of humor. He rarely laughed out loud and the most you could get out of him was a smirky grin, but he was a very discerning character and didn't suffer fools. Luckily, he gave me a chance to hang around as much as I did and become a part of the store family, even though I didn't have the most mature attitude then. We would play chess a lot, and he used to stop me when I made a move and interrogate me with "Why did you make that move? Did you have a good reason to make it, or were you just making it to make a move?" I have always taken that lesson with me in everything I do, and it in part led to my liking of strategy games. The other game we played, a LOT, was Spades. I developed a high degree of skill at that game thanks to playing with Dave and the gang at the store, to the point that I could force, or not, people to take extra tricks most of the time. I rarely would fall short. I could see the hands as they played and got a feel for what might be left and could shift strategy on-the-fly. The application of this skill in other areas has helped me with many things in my life over the years.



*The outside of Excalibur Comics, now MTOC Mattress & More, at 805 E. Mitchell St.*

Jeff Keller was a robust man. He must have been around 28 or so then, a guy with a big heart and big appetites. He was much more demonstrative than Dave, a fast talking wheeler dealer with a very outsized personality. Jeff would go see movies I couldn't or didn't and come back with a synopsis to share, acting out parts of the movie in hilarious fashion. I got the lowdown on Risky Business and Superman III from him. When it came time for us to move away from Milwaukee, I went to his house to buy some of his choice comics, for which he was selling to raise funds for one of the new Fiero cars that were going to be released early the next year.



Aiding an abetting Dave and Jeff was their other store employee, Gabe Serafin. Gabe was fun guy, a few years older than me, and I loved to get him laughing. We would talk about movies and comics, play cards, and I'd help him out sometimes with store stuff like



The main floor space that was Excalibur Comics. A wall existed just in front of the vertical support, dividing the sales area from the stock room.

shelving new comics.

What a time to be collecting comics! This was right at the start of so many things. The independent comics scene was just getting going which would become one of the biggest Marvel had just started Epic comics to allow creators more freedom and ownership of their creations. The Mini Series type of format had only had a few series out from the past year or two and were about to get a lot more common, with everything from *Contest of Champions* to *Green Arrow*, *Hawkeye*, *Jack of Hearts*, *Hercules*, of course the famous *Wolverine* mini series, and many more to come. This was also the cusp of the Maxi Series – a 12 issue series started with *Camelot 3000* featuring the beautiful artwork of Brian Bolland.

The *X-Men* ruled comics even after John Byrne moved over to *Fantastic Four* where he turned that book into a huge critical and commercial success. Frank Miller was still on *Daredevil* and was about to do some of his most defining work on that title with Klaus Janson, then move on to his own creator owned Mini Series for DC, *Ronin*. Simonson started his classic run on *Thor* with issue #337, resulting in a massive surprise sell out of that and subsequent issues and triggering a huge run up in price and demand for this issue. I myself only managed to get 3 copies after scrounging and paying \$3 for one of them after it was only on the stands for a few weeks. It went to \$6 after just a couple more weeks and plateaued somewhere around \$12.

A recession would soon follow after 1983, but in this time things were really going strong and comics were on fire. Silver Age comics were still affordable! So were most Golden Age comics, but stuff was largely inexpensive outside of keys. Even then, *Amazing Fantasy #15* was only about \$1000. *X-Men #94* was a \$60 book, *Hulk #181* was \$20 and *Fantastic Four #48* was \$35. We cry now when we see these prices, though at the time and to a 15 year old kid, a lot of them were still out of reach. I did have those three comics though, and in very fine or better condition. The market was robust and growing fast during this era, and the idea of the “hot” new comic started here. My collection grew as rapidly as I could raise funds, and this shop was my first real chance to get my hands on older material. Dave had mostly Marvels and a lesser amount of DCs. I managed to fill in things like the Adams' *X-Men* books, Jim Starlin's *Captain Marvel* and *Warlock* series, Mike Grell's *Warlord*, and get a good look at some Silver Age comics first-hand for the first time.

Speaking of guys like Mike Grell, he and Jerry Ordway used to frequent the shop. Jerry started coming in a bit later when he was on *All-Star Squadron* and just before he created *Infinity Inc*. Mike had been doing *Warlord* for a few years and had just come out with his first creator-owned comic, *Starslayer*. He would come to the shop and do sketches and show off new art. I have vivid memories of him working on the cover to the first *Warlord* annual and showing off the final cover to Jon Sable #1 a couple of months before it came out. Mike is one hell of a storyteller and has lived a most interesting life. He would often regale us with tales of the comic life, his collection of guns and swords, and his adventures performing actual jousts at Ren Fairs. He would always patiently share art tips with us, taking time to help us budding artists develop. It was always a fun time when Mike was around. These guys were my first contact with comic artists, and after reconnecting with Mike at a con in the early 90s, we have remained friends to this day.



Looking toward the front where the display cases were. There is a raised stage-like area in front of the windows behind the black sofa.

Friday was new comic day back then, though sometimes and on special occasions they would come in on Thursday. Jef Parker would come by to pick up his new comics every week and this is when I got to know him and make the connection that he was the one who ran those Burnham Bowl shows I went to. Jef was an irascible, irrepressible raconteur, there just isn't any other way to describe him. He was fun and funny, vaguely judgmental but always had good rationales to back up his claims, and was always, always smiling that big shit-eating grin of his. Few people truly wring the most out of life, and Jef certainly did his damndest to bend life to his will. This would of course cause friction with many people, but if you understood this quality about Jef, you could handle him. His obsession with comics would bring him huge success in life, but at a cost of at least one marriage and some other personal relationships. We would still go to the Bowl every month and eventually I would start to help out hauling comics and running the table there, and at a couple of other "bowling alley" local shows.

So many interesting things were going on at that store! One time I had just left the store to head home after a brief stop in. As I was going up the street, some guy passed me, and then about 10 steps later I passed a gang of five guys who I overheard say something about "getting" the guy I just passed. It sounded like they meant to rob or hurt him. Sure enough a few seconds later they surrounded and confronted him over some imagined slight or to try to shake him down, shoving him around and stuff. I ran back past them to the store, as they were just a few feet from the corner, and told Jeff. He came flying out of the store and ran the kids off. It could have just as easily been me.

Every Friday night we would hang out after the store closed for a game of D&D. This fascinated me, because you could make free-form decisions and work for a group effort. This more than any formal schooling that came later played the biggest role in helping prepare me for the job world. It helped give me a greater ability to think through problems from many angles and derive possible solutions with minimal information to go on.

One interesting event that happened during one of our D&D sessions. At this time, 8<sup>th</sup> street between Mitchell and Maple was a closed-off street that was part of a gentrification program to add more green spaces to parts of the city. It had a series of large concrete planters with small trees and other foliage in them, making a sort of small post-modern pseudo-park right in the middle of a bustling commercial district. Well someone forgot that the street no longer went through and jumped the curb, slamming their Dodge Omni into a concrete planter so hard and with such speed that the front end of the car was actually curled downward! They

must have gone airborne and hit at a sharp angle. We all heard the crash being only about 30 feet away, and luckily Darryl, one of the D&D players wives, was a nurse. We went and rendered aid until the medics arrived.

In the summer of 1983, I went with the guys from the shop to my first "real" comic con. This turned out to be the last Chicago Comic Con held at the downtown hotel before moving to the convention center. I still remember the room vividly. John Byrne was there though I was too intimidated and a neophyte to approach him, but there were many other artist there. A young Bill Willingham was there promoting Elementals when it was brand spanking new and I was able to talk to him for a little bit. In recent years, I was able to reconnect with Bill who filled in some details about that show and a very interesting tidbit came out.

At the 1983 show, he had a young, lovely artist with him that everyone nicknamed Kitty, because apparently someone mentioned she looked like Kitty Pryde. She was all of 16, around my age at the time, and we got to talking a little bit. My social skills at that time weren't that great, and I was so new to meeting artists and that side of the business that all it really amounted to was just some chit chat, but she was very nice and pretty and we had some nice conversation, so that was as much as I could have asked for at the time. Well I asked Bill about her recently and if he remembered who she was? Oh yes, he knew exactly who she was – she was Jill Thompson, before she was "Jill Thompson!" Now I wish I had bought the Wolverine sketch she did while we talked!

Shortly after we had returned from the Chicago Comic con, Dave would be seen in the shop less and less frequently. His carpet business had become increasingly busy and demanded more and more of his time. By the end of summer, Dave had made a decision to divest himself of the store. He worked out an arrangement with Jef Paker for the inventory, but by this time the store itself had been neglected. The utilities got shut off due to non-payment, and possibly the rent had gone unpaid too. Jef was handed a hot potato, and when he surveyed the situation he decided to pull up the stakes. We had to clear the store out, fast.

Next issue I will reveal the details as I remember them of the sale of Excalibur Comics to Jef Parker and the real start to Collector's Edge.





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